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Building a Schoolwide Leadership Mindset

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How can we create school cultures in which everyone shares responsibility?

In my early years as a principal, I thought treating teachers as professionals was enough. Teachers regularly gave me input through the instructional leadership team, feedback protocols, surveys, and one-on-one conversations. So when a retired principal came to observe the first staff meeting of the year and provide leadership coaching, I was sure he'd be impressed. The meeting started with a trust-building exercise; then I explained the new instructional improvement model, which would be driven by teacher-generated goals; next, the teachers gave feedback on the current professional development plan; and finally they worked in grade-level teams to plan for back-to-school night.

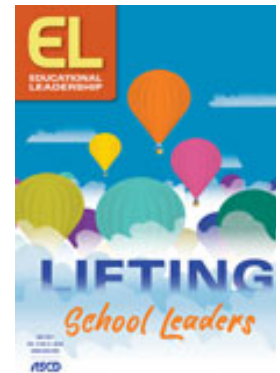
But instead of the praise I expected, the coach said something that surprised me.

Sarah, you're at the center of too much. Instead of focusing on what you need to cover, you should be thinking about the leadership skills you want to develop in teachers. Teachers should be leading these meetings, not you. What message are you sending your staff—especially new teachers—about who leads improvement at this school when you're at the front of the room more than anyone else? What kind of culture do you want this staff to have? You're losing time. You need to start building more teacher leadership.

He was right. Even though teachers had provided input in creating the school's professional development plan, it was still *my* plan, not *ours*. Even though teachers had worked in small groups that afternoon, and the staff meeting was interactive and participatory, I was the one in front of the room. It was *my* meeting, not *ours*. Although this feedback was hard to hear, it resulted in a powerful redefinition of leadership at my school.

A Culture of Collective Responsibility

When my coach used the phrase *teacher leadership*, he wasn't calling for more formal leadership roles for teachers. He was talking about building a schoolwide leadership mindset.



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When a teacher has that big-picture mindset, she doesn't just think, "How will this new initiative work for me?" or even "What will my team think of this idea?" Instead, she asks, "How will this benefit the whole school?" From this perspective, developing teacher leadership requires more than merely soliciting teacher input; it requires *changing the culture*. School leaders need to create a culture in which each professional feels an urgent responsibility to influence the achievement of *all* students.

The first step in this process is for principals to adopt a different view of their own role. Principals may find it disorienting to give up thinking of themselves as "the person with all the answers." After all, most school leaders have been successful precisely because they're active problem solvers, people who take initiative and aren't afraid to do the heavy lifting.

To shift my mindset as a principal, I had to change my definition of success. Initially, my goal in working with staff members was to create the conditions for all teachers to learn. Over time, I learned that it was equally important to create the conditions for all teachers to *lead*. I learned to delight more in hearing teachers come up with great ideas than in offering my own. As school leaders, we have to place more value on cultivating others' skills and insights than on demonstrating our own expertise.

A culture of collective responsibility doesn't take root simply because leaders resist taking charge, however. If we want to harness the expertise of our staff members and deepen their engagement in school improvement, we have to deliberately build their capacity to lead. To do this, we need to provide explicit supports for teachers in leading their peers. We also need to share responsibility for important work and communicate expectations clearly.

Building Teachers' Leadership Skills

In most schools, teachers measure their success by what happens in their classroom. Moving from this perspective to taking responsibility for student learning across the school can be a significant shift. Sharing accountability with peers is often complicated and messy. In fact, some teachers may not want to adopt a whole-school mindset because it bumps up against the traditional norms of schools. Dan Lortie (1975) documented these norms more than 40 years ago, and they've continued to reverberate in the culture of most schools (Donaldson et al., 2008):

Autonomy. I alone make decisions about what happens in my classroom; I don't involve myself with anyone else's practice.

Egalitarianism. All teachers have the same responsibilities; no individual teacher is considered more expert than her peers.

Seniority. Privileges and authority are awarded by length of service rather than merit.

Leaders need to recognize the powerful hold these norms have on their staff. For a teacher, leading peers requires acting in ways that may feel uncomfortable. I remember the experience of Kelly,¹ a teacher who had been chosen by her colleagues to lead the 3rd grade team at my school. She was also part of the schoolwide Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), which had created (with broader teacher input) a tool for schoolwide curriculum mapping. At a school with a history of independent curriculum planning, this tool was a big step toward coherence.

But when Kelly introduced the final curriculum mapping tool to her peers on the 3rd grade team, they vigorously questioned the point of the resource and its ultimate usefulness to the school. At this pivotal moment, Kelly shrugged her shoulders, looked down, and failed to advocate for the new tool she and her ILT colleagues had labored to design.

At a subsequent meeting, other ILT members joined Kelly's team and made the compelling case that students would be better served by a curriculum aligned across all grades, and ultimately the team was convinced. However, Kelly's struggle provided an important lesson. Teacher leadership sometimes requires that you step outside the previously established norms of collegiality. And when colleagues resent you ("Who are *you* to tell me about a new curriculum mapping tool?"), you can't simply give in and try to be accommodating.

So how can school leaders support teachers like Kelly as they learn to lead? First, we can help them anticipate the challenges of going against tradition and leading peers. After Kelly's struggle with her grade-level team, we designated time at ILT meetings to anticipate peer pushback. Teachers brainstormed ways to help their colleagues see the whole-school perspective that led to particular decisions and initiatives: "Remember to tell your team the purpose—why we need to do this work." "Does anyone have a summary of all our meetings that I can share with my team?" "Tell them how this system will help our English language learners."

Second, we can provide teachers with specific protocols and strategies for talking about practice with their peers, and we can model these facilitation tools. At my school, for example, we used the Five Whys protocol (in which the group collectively gets to the root of a designated problem by successively asking "why" questions) at an ILT meeting. Then, ILT teachers used the protocol at the next full staff meeting to engage their colleagues in discussing how we needed to improve as a school. This facilitation tool and others that we modeled gained converts throughout the school, and our meetings grew more productive.

Third, we can create guiding documents. This strategy may seem mundane at first—simply writing down the agreements you make. But these documents then become touchstones for collaboration. When referenced regularly, they signal that good teaching is considered a collective endeavor. For example, when we came up with schoolwide values, a team of teachers documented expectations for the whole staff. Whenever questions arose, teachers could refer to the document. And if teachers had a concern, the team leaders didn't have to feel pushy or intrusive. The document empowered them to advocate for improvement.

Sharing Responsibility for Meaningful Work

Choosing the theme for school spirit week may be an easy decision to turn over to a team, but such relatively superficial tasks aren't going to provide the long-term satisfaction and engagement of true leadership work. To engage teachers in a whole-school leadership perspective, principals need to share responsibility for work that directly affects teaching practice and student learning. Which aspect of our writing instruction is most important for us to improve? (The literacy team will lead that effort.) What schedules will allow us to maximize time for interventions? (A team of teachers will work with the assistant principal and the special education director to revise daily schedules.) How do we align our work on the math practice standards across the grades? (The math team will pilot strategies and then present a plan to colleagues.)

When teachers see that their leadership has improved something they care about, it brings a satisfaction that fuels them to continue. Here are two steps principals can take to engage teachers' leadership in meaningful work, thus building a sense of efficacy that reinforces a leadership culture.

Get out of the way. When the work gets more complex and challenging, it can be tempting for a leader to intervene—to make the work easier, to protect teachers from the weight of extra responsibility by holding onto control just a little bit longer, or to take over when things aren't proceeding the way we expected. Responses like these backfire. They deprive the school of teachers' expertise, and they deprive the teachers of the rewards that come from successfully leading improvement.

There are times when it's right for the leader to make a decision alone: special educators need to participate in progress check-in meetings; teachers must use formative assessments across grades. Other times, we're just micromanaging.

Teachers need to lead the way on certain essential issues for student learning. Which area of instructional focus will have the highest leverage for improving student learning? How should we involve families in understanding and promoting the school values? How do we align expository writing expectations across classrooms and grades?

When our district mandated that all schools implement Response to Intervention, it would have been easiest for me as principal to simply decide on and announce our new approach to progress monitoring and intervention. And what a mistake that would have been! Instead, a large group of teachers (dubbed the Design Team) met twice

during the spring and twice after the school year to flesh out a plan for their colleagues. The planning process was complicated, stressful, and fairly high stakes because the directive came from the central office.

In the end, the teacher-developed plan was more thoughtful than what I would have proposed. And equally important, teachers were invested in it. After considerable planning, the Design Team led a staff meeting to explain the new system and teachers' roles in it. Although the staff asked plenty of questions at this meeting, there was no pushback against the new plan. The questions focused on how to implement the initiative well, not whether we should pursue it.

Turn over work before people are ready to lead it. It's counterintuitive but logical. Engaging people in whole-school leadership means asking them to take on tasks they haven't done before. This requires that principals turn over meaningful leadership to people who will likely make mistakes. People learn to lead by leading, so we need to give them real practice to master the job. What initially feels like a risk ends up being a wise investment in the school's long-term improvement.

Of course, effective leaders scaffold leadership practice rather than throwing people into the deep end right away. This might include coplanning, role-playing, and helping to anticipate upcoming challenges. But even with the best preparation, when anyone leads a team meeting or staff workshop for the first time, the session won't run flawlessly. That experience, however, will provide invaluable learning for the first-time facilitator and ensure more success with the next leadership challenge.

How do principals create time for people to engage in meaningful leadership? It often requires creativity to design a school schedule that provides teams of teachers with collaborative planning time during the school day. This is when grade-level teams met at my school. In addition, some leadership teams met before or after school and received a small stipend for that work. And finally, some committees were voluntary. The reward was in the work.

Setting Clear Expectations

There are few things more discouraging for a teacher than investing valuable time—and potentially expending cultural capital to convince peers of the merits of a particular idea—only to have the work ignored or changed by the boss. So to effectively engage others in leading, principals need to clearly establish what everyone's roles will be and how decisions will be made. Will teachers provide input, with the principal then making the final decision? Will a teacher team design the professional development calendar and have final say on what's included—or will the principal approve the plan before it's shared more broadly? When the ILT plans the staff meeting, what will the principal's role be?

Sharing leadership requires anticipating and explicitly addressing questions like these before the work begins. When I asked teachers to lead the RTI initiative, I gave them my three criteria for a successful plan and let them know that I would need to approve the final plan before it was shared with the full staff. When our school identified core school values, I said that a representative teacher team would be the final decision maker. In both cases, I had great ideas and wanted to be more involved in the process—and in both cases, I forced myself to listen more and support the teachers' leadership. In the end, the decisions did not all match my personal leanings; and in the end, both were the right way to go.

Recent research confirms that when teachers are involved in important decisions, they're more invested in whole-school improvement. Conversely, when leaders involve teachers in important work only superficially (or not at all) they risk alienating those who want to help, limiting improvement, and causing teachers to consider leaving their schools (Johnson et al., 2014).

Adopting Two-Track Thinking

Every staff interaction holds an opportunity to either reinforce the existing egg-crate model of teacher isolation or actively develop an improvement-oriented culture of whole-school responsibility. One way of approaching such interactions is through what I call *two-track thinking*.

It works like this: While listening to a teacher's concern about a recent team meeting, I would be thinking about the details of that particular meeting and simultaneously thinking about how I could empower this teacher to think about her role in improving team meetings overall. One line of thinking focused on whatever we were discussing the other focused on engaging my colleague in leading the work.

When teams or individuals get stuck and look to the leader for help, it's an opportunity to expand their leadership mindsets. When you ask the right question rather than solving the problem, teachers become better equipped to solve future dilemmas. "You feel team members aren't dividing work evenly. What might be the root cause of the problem? How could you find out?" "What support will teachers need to roll out the new math assessments?" "Do we hear any disagreement today? How can we ensure that we are considering multiple perspectives?"

Because most teachers aren't used to thinking from a whole-school perspective, they'll need reminders. Over and over again. Remind faculty members that the homework policy came from the school culture committee, that teachers should go to the literacy team with questions about the new formative assessment, or that ideas for professional development should go to the ILT. By calling attention to these shifts, you reinforce a leadership mindset and cultural change.

Worth the Effort

Although student learning is clearly the most important measure of how well we're doing our jobs, substantive improvements in teaching and learning take time to show results. Sometimes you don't see growth right away. You need multiple ways of knowing that we're moving in the right direction.

Teacher leadership serves as another useful measure of a school's success. We should look for evidence of a culture in which teachers do the following:

- Identify and engage with teaching and learning issues across grades and subjects.
- Go to their colleagues first with problems—and solutions—rather than to the principal.
- Collaborate more than is formally expected.
- Expect to participate in significant design decisions.
- Take responsibility for identifying and addressing problems outside their classroom.

Of course, effective school leaders must exercise judgment about when and how to engage teachers in leading the work. Building a culture of schoolwide accountability is a developmental process that will look different in different contexts. However, as principals provide support and give meaningful decisions back to teachers, we should expect to see more innovation and a greater sense of professional success among teachers as they lead the way improving student learning.

READERS' STORIES

A Mighty Nudge

"Walk outside of your classroom walls to learn what to do inside your classroom walls." I hear these words as clearly today as if they were whispered yesterday. It's been 20 years since my mentor jostled me outside of my comfort zone and into the world of orchestrating professional development for teachers. With little jaunts like placing teaching tips on the lunch table or

modeling an engagement strategy during a department meeting, I nurtured a culture of professional learning. Soon, a small group congregated in my classroom before school to discuss effective writing strategies. This developed into an informal Critical Friends group; any one of us could be found walking the halls with our instructional bible, *Acts of Teaching* by Joyce Armstrong Carroll and Edward E. Wilson, ready to share a writing technique with another teacher. We blossomed into a PLC, sharing instructional strategies across all content areas on a weekly basis. Informal coaching became the norm! Then came another tap: "It's time to take a leap outside the school walls to expand your professional growth." At times, my trek has been uneasy, but I forge ahead within a system of schools supporting teachers in their growth journey, ensuring student achievement—all because of a mentor's nudge.

—Judy Muth, VP curriculum and instruction, Charter School Associates, Coral Springs, Florida

EL Online

For a discussion of building trust among teachers, see the online article "[The Trust Factor](#)" by Jane MODOONO.

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Endnotes

¹ Kelly's name and identifying characteristics have been changed.

² For additional facilitation tools, see *The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice* by Joseph P. McDonald, Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter, and Elizabeth C. McDonald (Teachers College Press, 2013) and *Meeting Wise: Making the Most of Collaborative Time for Educators* by Kathryn Parker Boudett and Elizabeth A. City (Harvard Education Press, 2014).

Sarah E. Fiarman is an education consultant and a former school principal. She is the author of *Becoming a School Principal: Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn* (Harvard Education Press, 2015) and the coauthor, with Elizabeth A. Ci Richard F. Elmore, and Lee Teitel, of *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (Harvard Education Press, 2009).

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